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ABSTRACT

Confrontation, or aggressive verbal behavior, has been defended as a rhetorical tactic by some communication theorists on five bases: biological, psychological, sociological, rhetorical, and intellectual. Proponents of "rhetorical sensitivity," however, differ from those who would accept confrontation uncritically. Confrontation is not an inevitable requirement for the establishment and maintenance of effective interpersonal or group relationships and exchange of ideas. On the other hand, automatic agreement that precludes consideration of alternative courses of action should be avoided. There can be an "Aristotelian mean" between foolish consensus seeking at one extreme and controversy for the sake of controversy at the other. Rhetorically, the use of confrontation seems to be advisable only when other approaches have failed. Philosophically, confrontational exchanges seem to be appropriate only when the intellectual and psychological benefits outweigh the potential costs or damages to interpersonal relationships. (RN)

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CONFRONTATION AND THE RHETORIC OF RELATIONSHIP

--A POSITION STATEMENT --

by

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Recently, several noted researchers have argued that confrontation (here defined as aggressive verbal behavior) is possessed of a bevy of important attributes. According to these writers, confrontation can be defended as a viable communicative option on five very different bases: (a) Biological--ethologists such as Desmond Morris (6) and Robert Ardrey (1) suggest that social confrontations are stylized, albeit civilized, extensions of our inborn needs to hunt and kill; (b) Psychological--Bach and Wyden, in the Intimate Enemy, (2:26-27) argue that "fighting is inevitable between intimates," that "a fight a day keeps the doctor away," and that "there can be no mature relationship without aggressive levelling"; (c) Sociological--Coser (3) and others contend that confrontations in a society help to maintain the "power balance" of that society in that they insure an equality of influence between the "haves" and have nots"; (d) Rhetorical--Simons (8) has recently claimed that confrontation is a very necessary and desirable communicative option in times of societal stress and that confrontational strategies are oftentimes superior to the sorts of "parlor room" persuasion that traditional rhetoricians have embraced; (e) Intellectual--As the ancients have so elaborately demonstrated, confrontation is perhaps the only way in which ideas can be contrasted and tested effectively so as to produce new and meaningful insight.

While we are impressed by the cogency of the arguments themselves, as well as by the passion with which they are presented, we, as proponents of what we (4) have termed rhetorical sensitivity, must differ with those who would support uncritical acceptance of confrontation as a rhetorical life-style. When doing so, we will not attempt to argue that confrontation is valueless, but rather that it is necessary to keep firmly in mind certan attitudes toward the philosophical worth and social utility of confrontation.

Confrontation and the Golden Mean

At the outset of our discussion, we do want to indicate an awareness that the juxtaposing of ideas can indeed appear to give rise to new and significant conceptualizations. The contrasting of ideas is perhaps the only thing common to all of the various meanings of the word "dialectic," a procedure which we obviously endorse, as evidenced by our presence on this panel today. Thus, in rejecting the view that confrontation and aggressive levelling are inevitably necessary to the establishment and maintenance of effective interpersonal relationships, we are not rejecting the view that the contrasting of theses is necessary to the generation of human knowledge. As we will suggest later, however, there are certain important ground rules which we feel should guide and sustain "learning" encounters.

Turning away for a moment from the world of dialectic, we would like to call attention to Aristotle's discussion of the mean in his Nicomachean Ethics. There we find the statement that in every divisible continuum there is a mean, an equidistant point between extremes. Aristotle realized, of course, that the arithmetical means of such continua may not represent the philosophical or interpersonal "ideal" for any one individual, but rather that the ideal mean is relative to oneself and is determined by one's own thoughtful calculations and propensities. Five pounds of food per day may be too much for Tiny Tim, but exactly the right amount for Dick the Bruiser.

Applying the Aristotelian concept of the mean to our topic of confrontation in communication, we might imagine a continuum with all of the undesirable attributes of "Groupthink" on one end, and the equally ugly churlishness of controversy-for-the-sake-of-controversy at the other end. To illustrate

the intellectual bankruptcy of Groupthink, we need only turn to Irving Janis (5:44), who defines Groupthink as "a quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action." In other words, Groupthink is a sort of Brobdignaggian monster that, in the absence of confrontation, gorges itself upon consensus.

Janis presents a cogent argument that the Bay of Pigs fiasco was a paradigmatic example where an unusually capable group of persons was blinded to rather obvious danger signals because of their several cravings for group harmony. Here, it seems, the advocates of confrontational communication have a strong argument. Who among us, for example, has not attended a meeting only to find ourselves suppressing "unpopular" thoughts in order to preserve the equanimity of the gathering, only to later regret that we did not voice our dissent?

But the other end of the continuum, where controversy-for-the-sake-of-controversy resides, also has its Waterloos. Here we find the petulant individual, the churlish adversary, or, worse still, the ruthlessness and recklessness of a Joe McCarthy, who has been characterized as a man with no particular program but one who caused havoc simply for "the thrill of the chase." Yet it is not only the deadly and dramatic flare of a Joe McCarthy that concerns us, but also the pompous pedantry of the teacher who enjoys deflating students' intellectual positions because he sees them as callow or derivative, no matter how new, significant, and exciting they may appear to the students themselves. For others, whose lives apparently bore them to distraction, confrontation brings zest into an otherwise dull

and deadly existence. For such persons, when no controversy is to be found, it must be manufactured. Such persons may see themselves as noble, selfless reformers who fulfill their rhetorical duties by fanning flames, flames which might otherwise have been left peacefully dormant.

Yet the fact remains that Groupthink poses its ever-present danger. Thus, our Aristotelian mean (as regards confrontation) must clearly exist at a mid-point between foolish consensus-seeking and a tawdry sort of interpersonal strife. If we stop and merely endorse this arithmetical mean, however, we have not gleaned what we should have from Aristotle's discussion, for he emphasizes that the mean is determined with reference to the particular individual. In discovering where our own mean might lie in relation to the topic of confrontation, we must conduct a sort of interpersonal inventory. If one's temperament is such that one tends toward Groupthink, he might well offset such a tendency with a bit more readiness to disagree, to express differences of opinion, so that his critical abilities are not undermined or intimitated by the deceptive attractions of interpersonal harmony. On the other hand, if one's life-style bespeaks that he dearly loves a fight, it is wise to remember the adage that Kennedy thought worth stating in his inaugural, "that those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside." There are, of course, times when we are confronted with the choice of conflict or the sacrifice of our message. Pursuit of rhetorical sensitivity need not end in such sacrifice, for even when engaged in conflict, there is room for making sensible and sensitive accommodations to the psychological and intellectual proclivities of others.

Confrontation and Relationship

Given the principles of rhetorical sensitivity (as we have articulated them elsewhere) and the Aristotelian view of the "confrontational mean" just noted, we can now address ourselves to certain principles which we feel should be considered when one confronts the prospect of confronting. For those who see inherent value in confrontation, we would urge the consideration of the following principles:

A. RHETORICALLY, THERE IS AMPLE REASON TO QUESTION THE INHERENT VALUE OF CONFRONTATION

1. Confrontation is particularly debilitating when it is viewed as the sole legitimate method of resolving interpersonal or conceptual differences. By realizing that confrontation is but one mode of generating human understanding or accord, we are encouraged to resist confrontation as a stylized response to human exigences.

2. Confrontation is appropriate rhetorically when other non-escalating forms of interaction have failed to produce the desired consequences. Because confrontation oftentimes breeds confrontation, it seems intelligent to opt for confrontational approaches after other rhetorical approaches have proven ineffective.

3. It seems reasonable to assume that there are many instances in which failing to engage in interaction might be better than interacting in a confrontational style. In non-rhetorical situations (i.e., when discourse of any sort cannot effect change), confrontation can only worsen an already undesirable set of circumstances.

4. The decision to engage in confrontational behavior must always be made in the light of certain powerful and imposing situational considerations. The timing of the communicative event, the intellectual and psychological propensities of our listeners, and a host of other variables all interact to dictate the wisdom of engaging in a confrontational exchange.

5. Because it maintains a "high profile," confrontation can distract us from certain rhetorical ends. In other words, the heat thrown-off by confrontation can force us to focus our attention on certain interpersonal oddities and not upon the pedagogical or persuasive goals we had in mind even if we initially agreed to engage in confrontation.

6. Confrontation seems to be most productive when it transpires among "rhetorical equals." When confrontation is engaged in by persons approximately equal in their abilities to command social influence, intellectual and psychological bullying, as well as rhetorical masochism, are eliminated as likely communicative outcomes.

7. Even when confrontation is selected as a rhetorical option, it seems important to remember that there are many "ways" in which to confront. Such a principle eliminates the sort of rhetorical non-productivity which Bach and Wyden associate with "gunnysacking" (a procedure by which we save up our complaints and frustrations in a type of rhetorical Pandora's box, only to unload them simultaneously upon an unsuspecting Other when interpersonal strife reaches its peak).

B. PHILOSOPHICALLY, THERE IS AMPLE REASON TO QUESTION THE INHERENT VALUE OF CONFRONTATION.

1. Because we cannot separate ourselves from the words we speak, spoken confrontations, by definition, involve existentual and deeply human risk. People, not disembodied "ideas," engage in spoken confrontations, which is perhaps why Haim Ginott urges harried parents to write their children "hate letters" from time to time rather than engage in the potentially hurtful sorts of interactions which might result when psyches are "charged" by spoken confrontations.

2. There are probably as many liabilities to confrontation as there are assets. Confrontation can produce close relationships and well-tested ideas BUT can also result in alienation and ignorance, since the interpersonal strife can often blind the combatants to the intellectual positions for which they are arguing.

3. It seems reasonable to question certain of the motivations residing in those who opt for confrontation as a life-style. After all, self-aggrandizement and interpersonal sadism often seem to be manifested by those who consistently use confrontational exchanges as a type of auto-therapy for a damaged or fragile self-image.

4. Because confrontational exchanges often operate at the "gut level" of human feelings, such interactions often produce a curious combination of offensiveness and defensiveness in people, apparently because of our very human tendency to match responses in times of interpersonal or philosophical stress.

5. Because of the significantly hurtful types of "fallout" which may obtain in confrontation, the burden of proof must always be placed upon confrontational behavior. Confrontation seems to be most appropriate when the intellectual and psychological rewards of confronting outweigh the many potential costs of engaging in such behavior.

While time does not permit us to explicate each of these philosophical assumptions in detail, we do feel that the ravages of everyday life with one another demand their comprehension and implementation. That interactions in marital, business, familial, and professional contexts continually force us to consider the relative merits of confrontation seems unquestionable. That confrontation is immutable in the lives of human beings, that inherent rhetorical or philosophical value lies in confrontational exchanges, or that confrontation, as a life-style, constitutes a meaningful raison d'etre for our rhetorical encounters with others, are all assumptions that we feel deserve careful scrutiny. For, if the Kennedy administration was weakened by Groupthink, then so did the Nixon administration's knees buckle under the burden of feckless confrontation. As AP correspondent Saul Pett (7) has said, the attitude of Nixon's haldemanesque underlings "remained that of the advance man, who is not interested in substance but looks at life only as a series of events to be managed. They knew nothing about understatement or persuasion. They thought in terms of attack, attack, even when attack was unnecessary." Perhaps if each of us cared enough to adapt our rhetorical life-styles to the unique and complex demands of others, even (or perhaps especially) when engaged in unavoidable conflict, then we can sail our own true courses between the Scylla of Groupthink and the Charybdis of confrontation-for-the-sake-of-confrontation.

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